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SUBJECT: GNP LEADERSHIP REACHES OUT TO U.S. ON BEEF

Classified By: AMB Alexander S. Vershbow. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

11. (C) Summary: On June 6 the Ambassador met with leaders of the ruling Grand National Party (GNP) to discuss ongoing public outcry over the U.S.-ROK agreement to lift the Korean ban on U.S. beef imports. GNP chairman Kang Jae-sup, who requested the meeting earlier in the week, said the party was concerned about the possible ramifications the protests could have for President Lee Myung-bak's efforts to restore the bilateral relationship. Kang said he understood that changing the agreement was difficult but that something needs to be done to address the public's and the opposition party's "obsession" with renegotiation. The Ambassador assured the GNP leaders that the U.S. understood the sensitivity of the issue; while the beef agreement was a sound scientific agreement that did not need to be renegotiated, the U.S. understood that Korean consumer concerns were real and was working to address them without renegotiating. We hoped the GNP (and ideally the opposition United Democratic Party) would emphasize that what matters is an outcome that addresses people's concerns about over-30-month beef rather than the method used to get there. Kang raised the possibility of sending a bipartisan National Assembly delegation to Washington but said the United Democratic Party (UDP) has not yet signed on; UDP chairman Sohn Hak-kyu, Kang said, is no longer taking his calls. End Summary.

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Comments to Media  
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12. (U) At the start of the meeting, GNP Chairman Kang delivered an opening statement in front of about 60 reporters. He noted that beef was a sensitive item in Korean culture, and reflects sentiment that cannot be explained by science alone. The two governments had been making faithful efforts to resolve the issue. Kang urged the Ambassador to fully report on the situation to Washington and help make every effort to smoothly resolve the situation. The Ambassador thanked Kang for inviting him to meet, said he was sensitive to the Korean public's concern, and appreciated the cultural heritage of Korea and place of beef in it. He explained that he had been working hard with Washington to try to find a solution that can address public concerns. (At this point the press departed). (NOTE: Substance of press opportunity was coordinated with Kang's staff beforehand. End note.)

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Protests Possible Throughout June  
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13. (C) In the private meeting, Kang Jae-sup pointed out that, since the first candlelight vigil was held in early May, there have been 27 such vigils with up to 60,000 participants. (Note: Estimates of participation in the

protests vary. Organizers claim 100,000 showed up to last weekend's protests, while the police claim the number was closer to 40,000. End note.) More rallies will be held over the three-day holiday weekend with an even bigger rally on June 10, the anniversary of the beginning of the 1987 pro-Democracy protests. The problem, Kang said, is that these protests have taken on a symbolic meaning, with candlelight vigils having a symbolic meaning in U.S.-Korean relations.

¶4. (C) Kang pointed out that the month of June is full of anniversaries that could cause ongoing problems. In addition to the June 10 anniversary, June 13 is the anniversary of the day when two middle school girls were struck and killed by a vehicle operated by U.S. servicemen in 2002, and June 15 is the anniversary of the first inter-Korean summit in 2000. The month culminates with President Bush's planned visit to Korea, making it likely that protests will continue.

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Impact on Bilateral Issues  
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¶5. (C) Kang said the source of these protests is complex. He did not believe the U.S. government was responsible for the current situation, but he worried that the continuation of the protests could carry over to other bilateral issues. Representative Im Tae-hee, also in attendance, underscored this concern. Im said that U.S.-ROK relations had only recently been restored and we should work hard to keep relations on track. The Ambassador agreed that the two governments should work together to resolve the issue as quickly as possible. He was dismayed to see Korean housewives holding up placards asking the U.S. not to "force Koreans to eat mad cows," as if an ally of 60 years would intentionally cause harm. It was important to resolve this, because more than beef was at stake -- we needed to move forward in an effort to get the KORUS FTA ratified this year, and continue building our partnership.

¶6. (C) Kang said he understood that private sector importers and exporters were making efforts to address public concerns about over-30-month beef, but he said it was the party's hope that the two governments could find some way to guarantee that, either through re-negotiation or additional negotiations (he noted the specific terms were not as important as a government role). The ROKG understood the difficulty of renegotiating, but the ruling party had to find a way to address the UDP's and the public's "obsession" about renegotiating the agreement, Kang explained.

¶7. (C) The Ambassador replied that the existing agreement is a good one, and in our view doesn't require renegotiation since it is based on science, which should be the basis of trade between our two countries (in addition, renegotiation would also hurt U.S. negotiations with other countries -- the same countries Korea is asking us to reach OIE-consistent beef agreements with). The U.S. understood, however, that the consumer concerns right now are real, and was working to find a way to address them. The Ambassador expressed his hope that the GNP leadership would be able to convince the Korean public that getting the right outcome was more important than the means. Kang said that with the focus on "renegotiation," some kind of government role in guaranteeing any private sector arrangement would help resolve the political situation.

¶8. (C) Im said the key was to resolve public concern about beef from cattle over 30 months of age. Kang said that he understood that the private sector is trying to voluntarily restrict beef imports from cattle over 30 months of age. He expressed his hope that importers and exporters would take into consideration the wishes of consumers. Ambassador explained that we are trying to find a way to address those concerns, and, while requesting that it not be made public, said there was ongoing discussion of some steps that could be taken to address Korean concerns about beef over 30 months old.

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Opposition Antics  
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¶9. (C) Kang said the ROKG hopes to send a bipartisan National Assembly delegation to Washington early next week to discuss beef and the KORUS FTA. The UDP, however, has not yet agreed to participate. Kang said he had met with UDP leader Sohn Hak-kyu shortly after the vigils began. Kang offered to cancel a lawsuit currently pending against the UDP if the opposition would cooperate on the beef issue. Kang said the UDP refused the offer and that Sohn will no longer take Kang's calls. The UDP seemed determined to drive a wedge between Korea and the United States. The Ambassador said he was distressed by the opposition party's attitude. Noting that his comments should be kept private, he commented that the UDP should think about Korea's reputation in the world as a government based on the rule of law rather than on protests and propaganda.

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Comment  
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¶10. (C) GNP staff coordinated with us before the meeting, and said the GNP's goals were: (1) to show that the GNP was trying to appear proactive to a disenchanted public; and (2) to obtain direct confirmation that the U.S. is not prepared to renegotiate the beef agreement (which they understood based on ROG briefings is a non-starter). In that respect, this meeting stuck to the script, and Kang showed a readiness to avoid inflaming the situation by not asking particularly pointed questions about beef in front of the cameras (or at all). Hopefully, this will help enable the GNP to build support for whatever solution is reached (which will clearly not meet the demands of the street activists). While the GNP has a majority in the new National Assembly session and won't need UDP support to pass legislation, in the past week the GNP has been trying to be responsive to UDP concerns to win their cooperation on organization of the new National Assembly session. That effort appears to have been unsuccessful.

VERSHBOW